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TO Department of State

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1. Internal Developments

Politically, the Afghan New Year (March 21) began with a non-event. Persistent and widespread rumors predicted that President Daoud would choose Nauroz to announce the wholesale removal of Parchamists and other radical leftists from the Cabinet and Ministries. While no such announcement was forthcoming, the rumors continue though with an altered time table - the first anniversary of the coup (July 17) now being the occasion of choice.

The process of consolidation of power by Daoud has continued. It now seems that Daoud prefers to remove those more radical senior members of the government from positions of power and influence one by one over time. Parcham could elect a confrontation rather than accept a slow attrition, but there is yet no evidence upon which to base any prediction. There was in March a lessening of tension in the internal political atmosphere; and there is a generalized feeling that normality is returning and political change will occur in a more traditional Afghan fashion.

II. Foreign Affairs

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A. United States

While we continued to receive strong expressions of desire for a significant United States presence in Afghanistan (especially for continued USAID projects in the Helmand Valley) from the highest reaches of the government, dealings at the operational level were more mixed and problematic.

USIS was informed that while recently announced regulations calling for prior review of cultural and informational activities remain in force, the clearance procedures described therein for films shown at the Embassy, the American Center, or private homes no longer need be followed. On the other hand in mid-March the Minister of Education suddenly reversed the original request for placement of Peace Corps English teachers and asked that 14 of 19 volunteers be shifted to less remote sites. Similarly private U.S. medical teams have been ordered to withdraw from the Hazarajat and Jalalabad areas.

These latter actions do not seem directed at limiting or reducing the U.S. presence as such but rather illustrate a growing reluctance to have foreigners living and working in close contact with the Afghan populace outside of Kabul or the major provincial centers. While the discontinuity between high level encouragement and working level constraint may, to some extent, be explained by inadequate internal communications, tangled lines of authority and responsibility, and uncertainty and maneuvering for position within the Ministries, both attitudes reflect real Afghan political preoccupations: the need for the presence of the United States and other friendly countries to politically balance Afghan dependence on the Soviet Union, and the traditional Afghan xenophobia during times of national stress.

B. Pakistan

March saw no major departures from Afghanistan's public position on Pashtunistan: the atmosphere of unfriendliness and low level hostility towards Pakistan continued.

The early March statements by Pakistani Ministers of Interior and Law justifying the extension of emergency powers in terms of Afghan intransigence and machinations in the tribal belt drew a predictable response from the Afghan Foreign Ministry and a point by point refutation in the March 9 issue of the government operated Kabul Times.

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C. India

An Indian Military Delegation headed by the Army Deputy Chief of Staff and joined by the Deputy Minister of Defense on March 11 visited Kabul March 4-16 to discuss the possibility of training for Afghan military. The extensive meetings were given wide publicity and Daoud personally hosted a banquet for the Delegation, a significant gesture in that he had done this only once before and then for the Soviet Military Delegation. Preliminary reports indicate tentative agreement for the training of Afghan officers by the Indians.

One obvious desired result of the Afghan policy of strengthening ties with India is to find an alternative to the Afghan military's almost complete reliance on the Soviets. While another goal may be the isolation of Pakistan, we receive the clear impression that India is exerting a moderating influence on Afghanistan's Pashtunistan policy and attempting to deflate Afghan notions of the imminent disintegration of Pakistan.

D. Iran

Relations with Iran continued to warm as the Afghan leadership, under Daoud and Naim's prodding, appears to have relaxed somewhat its traditional xenophobia towards its larger and wealthier neighbor. Overall atmospherics have visibly improved. On March 7, Daoud sent a message to the Shah (and to the President of Iraq) imploring both in the name of Islamic brotherhood to resolve their border dispute peacefully. Both leaders sent messages of thanks in reply and the Afghans were particularly pleased by the laudatory language about Daoud in the Shah's statement. Naim and Abdullah will go to Tehran in early May for further talks and will probably seek to expand economic cooperation. The Helmand Waters Treaty will probably be discussed, but there has been no indication that the GOA is ready to conclude this agreement; in fact, earlier remarks by Abdullah indicate that the GOA may wish to finesse the broader issue by agreeing instead on a downstream dam that could control the flow of water in the frontier area.

Daoud undoubtedly has both political and economic considerations in mind in his effort to improve relations with Iran. The Afghans could of course use Iranian financial assistance. Daoud may also have in mind an attempt to drive some sort of wedge between Pakistan and Iran, and this, when added to his major effort to structure closer ties with India could, in his estimation, strengthen Afghanistan vis-a-vis Pakistan.

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E Soviet Union

The Afghan-Soviet Trade Agreement, which had been under negotiation since before the coup and was put in final form in Kabul in January, was signed in Moscow by Afghan Commerce Minister Jalaliar in mid-March. The only exceptions to international market prices are Soviet petroleum products and Afghan natural gas. According to media reports, a cultural exchange agreement and an umbrella trade agreement valid for five years replacing the 1950 agreement were also signed.

III. Comings & Goings

A. A Soviet Economic Delegation arrived in Kabul early March to discuss expansion of economic cooperation between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union.

B. A delegation headed by the Indian Deputy Minister of Community Development and the President of Rural Development Cooperation visited Kabul late March to discuss the possibilities of Indian assistance for Afghan rural development projects.

C. Sheikh al Jabar al Sabah, special adviser to the King of Kuwait, arrived in Kabul March 24 for a 4-day unofficial visit during which he was received by President Daoud.

D. Daoud's brother and close adviser Mohammad Naim, and Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullah left Kabul March 26 to visit Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia in an apparent attempt to enlist Arab support on the Pashtunistan issue and to improve Afghanistan's image in the wake of Bhutto's success at the Lahore Islamic Summit. Naim broke off his visit to attend President Pompidou's funeral.

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